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ABSTRACT

Increased international business and technological advances that speed business communication are affecting the expectations that business has for translators. More companies are asking translation agencies to translate such items as English business letters, advertising campaigns, flyers, brochures, and technical manuals into other languages, often with unrealistic time expectations. The need for translators in today's global market far exceeds the needs during World War II or during the Sputnik era, but nothing has been done to train corporate and industrial personnel to work with translation agencies and translators. This paper discusses the difficulties and misunderstandings related to time factors, the role of the media, the difference between translators and interpreters, job prestige of translators, cultural and contextual factors that are not communicated to the translator, target audience, and financial compensation. Recommendations are offered to help businesses avoid unrealistic expectations from translators, including providing the translation agency with a list of the company's special vocabulary. Contains 6 references. (LB)

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Unrealistic Expectations Businesses Have about translators

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UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS BUSINESSES HAVE ABOUT TRANSLATORS

New technological advances have made possible faster means of communication, and today's businessmen must use these means effectively.

More importantly, business people have to recognize that to be successful in their dealings with others, to sell their wares, and to improve their own job positions, they must be able to communicate clearly and effectively. Stacey Sanderlin, a technical writer for DST Systems in Kansas City, Missouri says,

> Language is the most obvious barrier to producing manuals for non-English readers. Everyone has heard examples of companies that have failed at marketing their products internationally because their marketing strategies failed. For example, one Chinese manufacturer quickly learned that automobile batteries marketed under the trade name "White Elephant" would not sell in the United States (96).

Because of these reasons, more companies are asking translation agencies to turn English business letters, advertising campaigns, flyers, brochures and technical manuals into Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Swedish, etc. However, I must say some businessmen have unreal expectations about what these translators can do in a limited time.

The U.S. found itself in great need for translators after World War II because of German scientific discoveries and the need to translate and understand them (Nowak 18). The next big rush for translators, this time Russian, was around 1957 with the launching of *Sputnik*. In neither of these instances did the country have the bilingual resources among its citizens to perform the tasks required. In many cases, recently arrived immigrants were called upon to do the job.

Even these events did not open the eyes of the American public. The U.S. continued to grow in terms of technology and science without making any effort to learn foreign languages. According to Harry Obst, Director of Language Services, U.S. Department of

State, "...we rarely find curricula based on the realities and demands of the marketplace where students ultimately are supposed to work. In this regard, the United States ranks among the worst academic offenders" (100).

The rest of the world had to learn English in order to communicate with the super power. "God speaks English! Why can't everybody else do it?" English became the language of diplomatic and business transactions; Americans expected it and the rest of the nations obliged.

In the last few years, there has been a complete turn of events, and the U.S. is in need of competing in the international market against other super powers willing to negotiate overseas in any language. According to Deanne Lindberg Hammond, President of the American Translators Association in "The Translation Profession in the United States Today":

> ...Foreign trade and international business have become an important part of the American economy. One third of all corporations in the United States are either owned or based abroad; more than 6000 companies have at least some of their operations abroad; one of every six production jobs in the United States depends on foreign trade; more than 5 million current jobs in the United States rely on imports and exports; four of every five jobs are generated as a result of foreign trade (135).

The spread of technical manuals and exchange of business letters, in great part due to computers, modems, fax machines, etc., is monumental in today's global market. Businesses and industries are constantly networking and, therefore, there is an unprecedented need for translators.

While translators have become a necessity for international firms, nothing has been done to train corporate and industrial personnel to work with translation agencies and translators. This is no surprise. The general public seems to ignore any effort in trying to

understand other languages and cultures.

The opinion generated by translation agencies is that American companies are less than international. Managers and heads of international firms approach these agencies with an astonishing lack of understanding of what the translation of a business or industrial document will imply, not only from a linguistics point of view but also from a cultural perspective. In general, they prefer to deal with Europe because "they speak our language," meaning there are similarities between the cultures and the economic systems. They do not have any sense of the quality of a translation or about the time needed for a quality job that will give a good and correct impression to the client.

The media networks contribute to the confusion; every time a foreign chief of state is shown with an interpreter to facilitate the spoken communication, the words across the screen are: "translator's voice." The general public considers that someone is a translator if he/she can make an English version of a document or oral message in another language, regardless of whether the work is in written form or as spoken communication. To start dealing correctly with a translation agency, people who work internationally should know the difference between the two types of foreign language translating experts: translators and interpreters. A translator is the person whose expertise is to put in writing materials from another language; they do not become acquainted with the writer or the reader. To translate spoken communication, an interpreter is needed; he/she is the person who works in a live situation and interacts with speakers and listeners. The skills for each of these situations are quite different and very few professionals are capable of handling both since they demand different skills.

There are still other stereotypes. One of them is that translators and interpreters, and for that matter foreign language professionals, are people who speak several languages. Once the person is identified as a foreign language professional, the next question is "how many other languages do you speak?" Or worse, "if you know Spanish, you must know French, Italian and Portuguese!" Not too long ago, I had to take a call on behalf of one of my French colleagues because the caller insisted that in her absence, I should be able to do a quick translation over the phone. The caller was terribly disappointed with me! If I spoke Spanish, why couldn't I translate French into English?

Translators are usually thought of as performers of a job without any prestige, especially in the academic world where a well-thought of professor who dares to do this type of activity, is looked down upon, as if learning and putting into practice his/her knowledge of technical and business vocabulary was no task and no great contribution to the goodwill among countries.

Another misunderstanding resides in the comprehension of cultures. A bona fide translator is someone who understands the culture and the varieties of the language he/she translates. When hiring a translator, businessmen need to be specific in their requests. A translation is not a matter of converting a document into the Morse code. The idea of the translator/robot has brought up a great deal of confusion and blunders in fields as delicate as that of international diplomacy. A translator is someone who has cultural sensitivity. However, companies do not see this necessity. For example, there are quite a few linguistic and cultural differences, not only between Spain and the Latin American countries but also among the Latin countries themselves.

Not too long ago, the translation agency for which I do consulting was in the process of translating material for a record company. To the translators' surprise, the material was returned with vocabulary corrections. The record company never bothered to explain to the translators that the material for translation was going to be used in Spain and that, furthermore, an advertising agency in that country was in charge of approving the text. Of course, the head of the record company in the United States wanted to know why there were so many corrections. He thought that there is only one kind of Spanish language.

In their lack of specificity, businesses expect the translator to guess the source and nature of the translation in question, sometimes ignoring any request for explanations. It is the translator's task to practically read the client's minds. Here is an example: A tool company called a translation agency requesting a French translation of the following sentence: "Welcome to the big time." The only information given was that it was for a poster. After a lot of thinking, the translator came up with a good French sentence that in English meant: "Welcome to the World of the Professional." A few days later, the company called back to say that its French distributor was upset. He felt the translation would be offensive to the general French public. Of course, he blamed the translator. As it turned out, the sentence was needed for a poster with a pinup girl holding a box of tools. Had the company clarified its needs, a lot of time would have been saved and confusion avoided. Management must realize that what takes months to be created and published in the English language at an advertising agency cannot be translated overnight with fine tuning accuracy.

Management needs to be taught that the translation of a document, either technical or promotional, is a job that takes as much creativity as the English original.

Management needs to have the same type of respect for the translator as it has for its advertising department or agency. Although the image of the translator has improved in recent years and people are more aware of the value of a qualified translator, the false idea that anyone can be a translator still prevails. Translators are often humiliated by businesses and industries. After receiving a translated document, executives who realize they are not capable of judging the quality of a translation, submit it to a person in their firm identified as a native speaker of the language in question. This could be anybody in the company from an executive to a janitor whose grandparents spoke the language and who for years has claimed to speak the target language to impress the boss. Many times, these persons correct the translations or say that they cannot understand them which makes the officer in charge doubtful of the translator's skills. His/Her complaints can be significant and the real bilingual professional, unfortunately, often bears the burden. Sometimes clients feel they do not have to pay for the services since their own "expert" did not agree with the translations. All professional translators are linguists, whether formally trained or by hands-on experience. They know their job. Therefore, if the translating agency chosen is a reputable one, the customer should not have any problems or questions. The client needs to understand that the translator is also a professional who guarantees his/her work, not to mention the fact that the translation agency usually requires that another native speaker of the same language proofread the document.

Not too long ago, a personal acquaintance of mine in Chicago, a very well-educated and traveled woman, who is the head of a large manufacturing company said to me, "You know, we have so much trouble with the Spanish translations of our manuals. It looks as if

there are two different types of Spanish, one for the spoken language and the other for the written language. When we submit the translated manuals to our Spanish-speaking personnel, they cannot understand them! Why is that?"

Very simple. First of all, the phenomenon occurs in every language. There is a formal way of writing as opposed to the casual way of everyday talk. Furthermore, a majority of the Spanish-speaking workers in factories and industries in the U.S. have had no formal training in their language, and reading a manual could be a cumbersome task. Of course, there is also the possibility that the document was translated at a higher comprehension level than needed. The translator should be told who his/her readers are going to be. In the case of an industry with a large number of workers whose native language is other than English, it would be wise on the part of the firm to appoint one person with knowledge of the language spoken by the workers to be the liaison. In this way, the translator can have consultations with that person, thereby eliminating discrepancies in translation.

Problems between clients and translators could possibly arise from the lack of comprehension companies have about the translator's tasks as well as a lack of respect for this profession. This attitude could be due to the limited number of professional translators. Ms. Lindberg Hammond, President of the ATA, explains that the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Labor Statistics do not have a category for translators since the number is statistically insignificant. It is also impossible to have accurate statistics since full time positions for translators are minimal, even at large institutions like the World Bank or the U.S. government agencies. Most professionals work as part-time or free-lance translators

(139).

Another aspect of the translator's role is the need to be compensated as a professional. Languages reflect cultures and translators have to give a great deal of thought before turning in a finished product to prevent clashes. Translators usually become part of the staff of a translation agency; this is the best course to follow for them since agencies have their own salespersons who search for clients. These agencies usually have specific fee scales that include number of words and difficulty of the document. And, like in any other business, the supply and demand plays an important role. Let's consider the case of Spanish translations. The Telephone Directory of every large city in the United States has "Translators & Interpreters" as one of its listings. Almost with no exception, there is at least one agency advertising lowest rates for Spanish documents. I have seen ads offering Spanish translations at three cents per word. Whether the translations that come out of such a price are reliable or not is besides the point. According to an article in Business Marketing, written by Tom Eisenhart,

> You get what you pay for in the translation business, explains Jeffrey Kraft, a manager of marketing communications for Citicorp Global Payment Products, Hindsdale, Ill.
> ...According to Mr. Kraft, many "discount" translation firms work under a free-lance system, and farm out work to foreign exchange students and others with a bilingual background. He says that presents two drawbacks: Freelancers typically don't understand how to translate Citicorp's financial terminology in a meaningful way. And free-lancers usually aren't available to answer questions that may come up between projects (42).

The article continues, saying that international firms use the services of free-lancers only for "quick-and-dirty" projects, meaning, letters and orders that need to be answered.

Companies have options when they need to prepare technical literature for non-English

speaking customers. Stacey Sanderlin explains that they can choose from one of these methods: a) use of translating machines or computer programs, b) preparation of documents using Controlled English and c) human translators (96).

For the first of these three methods Ms. Sanderlin says:

> ...although research in this area began in the early 1900s, it has proceeded slowly. ...Machine translation has only recently become a viable alternative for companies preparing manuals for non-English readers. And even now, machine translators are suitable only for manuals that use standard vocabulary and are being translated into common languages. If standard vocabulary is used in the manual, machine translation is about 80% accurate for translation from English into French, Spanish and German (97).

This is a costly enterprise. The company not only pays for the machine but also for the human translators who have to check the version given by the machine. In spite of this drawback, a company can save time using translating machines.

The second choice "is the use of a limited form of English, sometimes referred to as Controlled English, Simplified English, Fundamental English or International Service English" (Sanderlin 97). Two principal elements are: a small core vocabulary and a larger technical glossary (Sanderlin 97). Obviously, this method saves on the cost of a well-produced translation in several languages, but it has also disadvantages. The manuals written in Controlled English are usually poor stylistically speaking and do not address any cultural differences. Also, it is difficult to find well-trained technical writers with a good command of this technique.

The traditional method in which a translator is hired remains the most reliable system, although it has the disadvantages of being expensive and time-consuming. A knowledgeable translator will be able to produce a linguistically and culturally sound manual.

And now, to avoid unrealistic expectations from translators, here is a list of recommendations which could be instrumental in obtaining success when working with two languages.

1. Increase the knowledge your employees have of the language and culture of the country/ies your company is dealing with. Have a specialist sensitize your personnel.

2. Look for quality rather than cheap rates.

3. Find a translation agency that assures its clients that its translators are not only bilingual but also have writing skills (that is style and grammar), who are aware of regional peculiarities, and who update themselves periodically either through visits to countries where the target language is spoken or by reading magazines and periodicals written in that language. Harry Obst, Director of Language Services of the U.S. Department Of State explains it very well:

> Language is a jungle that grows unpredictably in all directions at once. New words are created every day. New meanings are attached to old words every day...You open a dictionary of the 1950s and it tells you the word for the concept is "underdeveloped country." The dictionary of the 1960s says the word is "developing country." The dictionary of the 1970s' claims it is "less developed country." The dictionary of the 1980s says the concept is called "third-world country." The dictionary of the year 2000 may call it "upward mobility country" Who knows? Nobody. Each dictionary is obsolete the day it is printed (101).

4. Choose an agency and stick to it; this is mandatory if you know your company will have several projects at the present time or in the future. In this way, you can "bring them up to speed on terminology" (Einsenhart 42).

5. As an appendix to #4, provide a list of your company's special vocabulary. Many industries already have developed these vocabularies and are willing to provide the translators

with them. The formulation of new words in a foreign language for technical manuals is often a taxing job. By working with one single agency, the translators will be able to develop a glossary of technical expressions specific to the particular company. The key to a successful operation in any field is consistency in communication.

6. Make sure that your English document is well written. Sometimes, the translating process is delayed because the English document is poorly written. Many times translators are criticized by companies without taking into consideration that their own version was difficult to read.

7. When possible, send the translated version to the firm's distributors and representatives in the foreign country for approval before printing. Tom Eisenhart points out:

> The procedure accomplishes two goals. First, it eases the U.S. marketer's conscience to know that the materials are approved by a native speaker familiar with the company's messages. And the foreign contact, who may have a negative attitude about communications translated in the United States, will feel directly involved (42).

Regardless of how many McDonald's and Pizza Huts exist around the world and how much other nations like to dress and look like Americans, when it comes to marketing a product, the manufacturer needs to be aware that "any product is greatly influenced by its surrounding, the cost of living, the size of homes, the cost of energy, savings habits, union regulations, tax codes, and so on, which means that a product entering a translatory pipeline...does not necessarily come out where it is supposed to" (Frand 107).

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